

Appall-o-Meter

By David Futrelle



Secret Agent Furby 8.2

Countless Americans have discovered the agony that is the Furby—the perpetually talkative, “interactive” stuffed monsters that are designed to “learn” English by yammering away constantly with anyone unfortunate enough to be in the room with them. Apparently, though, the National Security Agency is afraid that Furbies are more than merely annoying: They may be the first stuffed animal security risk. The furry creatures already have been officially banned from Fort Meade in Maryland.

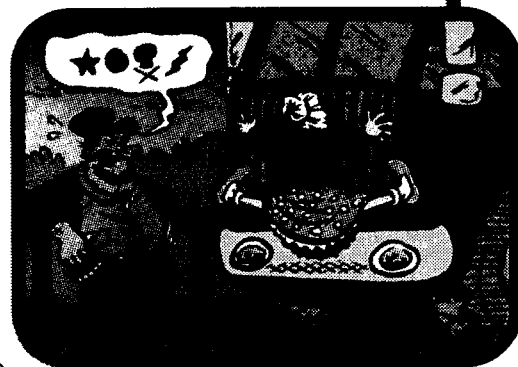
“Personally owned photographic, video and audio recording equipment are prohibited items. This includes toys, such as ‘Furbys,’ with built-in recorders that repeat the audio with synthesized sound to mimic the original signal,” reads the Furby Alert given to NSA employees in December. “We are prohibited from introducing these items into NSA spaces. Those who have should contact their Staff Security Officer for guidance.”

The agency was apparently concerned, as one government source told the *Washington Post*, “that people would take them home and they’d start talking classified.”

Keep On Truckin’ 6.3

After 81-year-old Gertie Witherspoon was struck and killed by a grain truck on a Missouri highway last summer, her daughter was sued by the truck’s insurance company for her grandmother’s alleged “negligence” in stepping onto the highway in the first place.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Great Western Casualty Company sought \$2,800 from Joyce Lang, Gertie’s daughter, in recompense for the amount of damage her dead mother did to the big rig. As the *Journal* notes, the insurance company “concedes that the ... pursuit of \$2,888 is risky from a public relations standpoint.” “It doesn’t do anything to help people’s impressions of us,” says Scott



Rager, executive vice president of Great West. On Jan. 16, the company announced that it was withdrawing the claim.

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national forest lands and protect endangered species habitat. There have been numerous armed confrontations with federal officials and environmentalists.

In 1993, Leroy Jackson, a traditional Navajo who had challenged the decimation of his reservation’s forest by a white-owned timber company, received death threats and was later found dead in his van in a remote spot in northern New Mexico. In 1997, Santa Fe environmentalist Sam Hitt received death threats and was hung in effigy outside the offices of the organization he heads, Forest Guardians.

In December 1998, the Santa Fe offices of Animal Protection of New Mexico had its windows blown out by shotgun blasts. A group called the Minutemen has claimed responsibility

for the terrorist action. Police believe the attack was in retaliation for the group’s support of wolf reintroduction.



To deter ranchers, the wolves will be spray-painted orange.

One of the targets of this attack may have been Patricia Wolff, who works as a consultant for the group. Wolff has received several death threats, dating back to a 1992 incident investigated by

the FBI. Wolff also had released a tape recording of a May 1998 conversation she had with a trapper named Jody Lee

Cooper, who claimed that ranchers in Glenwood, N.M., had wanted to hire him to kill the reintroduced wolves. Cooper, who refers to himself as “the predator’s predator,” said that he had been offered “\$35,000 in cash to kill ‘em all.” Wolff took the tape to the Fish and Wildlife Service, which failed to follow up on the evidence. “I think he was truthful and credible,” Wolff says. “He had no motive to lie to me.”

This spring, 15 more wolves are scheduled to be released. The new wolves will be spray-painted orange, supposedly to differentiate them from coyotes, which ranchers can legally kill. This glow-in-the-dark marking, however, may just make the animals easier targets. ■

Rudy's Sweet Stock Deal

By Neil deMause

After months of backroom brokering and whispered rumors, in December, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani announced a plan to give nearly \$1 billion in public money to keep a city institution in town. And—surprise!—it wasn't the Yankees.

While Giuliani's dream of a new Yankee Stadium remains on hold, the mayor has found a new beneficiary for his civic largesse: the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE). Under a plan announced on Dec. 22, the city and state will spend at least \$700 million to buy land and build the exchange a new headquarters across Wall Street from its current home and provide an additional \$160 million in tax breaks and low-cost electricity. The old exchange building will be converted into a police substation.

And what will the city get in return? "Basically, the stock exchange agrees to stay at this facility for the next 50 years, with renewal options of up to 99 years," mayoral spokesman Kurt Ritter says. What about guarantees that the exchange will maintain its current work force? "Nothing on job retention," he says.

"To spend that much money per job and not have a clawback for retention requirement is outrageous, frankly," says Greg LeRoy of Good Jobs First, whose "No More Candy Store" remains the definitive treatise on corporate subsidies.

Nonetheless, this has been standard operating procedure for the Giuliani administration. According to state Sen. Franz Leichter, the mayor has doled out \$1.75 billion in "corporate retention" subsidies to more than 40 companies in his five years in office, most without any job retention

requirements. In fact, about a quarter of the beneficiaries have since made significant layoffs.

Clocking in at well over \$100,000 per job retained (about 5,000 people work the exchange floor, but only about 1,000 are employed directly by the NYSE), the stock exchange deal ranks among the most expensive in history. For his part, the mayor has argued that dozens of other firms might have followed the NYSE out of town, and the subsidy was necessary to ensure that "the heart of Wall Street will remain on Wall Street."

Yet critics note that other Wall Street stalwarts such as Merrill Lynch and Travelers have already cut deals for city money to stay in town. And as for the NYSE, "most people say that they were never thinking about going to New Jersey in the first place," Leichter aide Jonathan Bowles says.

Even corporate subsidy expert LeRoy, who notes that "no city has been shaken down by more major employers than New York," seems stunned by the NYSE announcement. "Wow, \$100,000 per retention, that's really pricey," he says. "It would be typical in economic develop-

ment to do deals where the price tag per job might be \$10,000—that would be pricey, but not unheard of. You've got to ask yourself, what else could we have done with the money if we had chosen not to spend it on that?"

City schools activists estimate that \$900 million could provide 42 new 800-seat schools citywide, eliminating New

York's overcrowding problems.

On Dec. 14, as the NYSE deal was being finalized, Leichter joined four City Council members in introducing a

Etc.

Justice Served

The United Farm Workers union has won another battle. In November, the California Agricultural Relations Board (ALRB) threw out a union election at Coastal Berry, the nation's largest employer of strawberry workers, finding that 162 workers at the company's Oxnard Ranch weren't given the opportunity to vote.

The UFW refused to participate in the July election and accused its winner, the Coastal Berry Farmworkers Committee, of being a company union (see "Strawberry Workers Elect Shady Company Union," September 6). The Coastal Berry Farmworkers Committee is appealing the decision.

The UFW made significant contributions to newly elected California Gov. Gray Davis' campaign and hopes he'll reward them with a more sympathetic ALRB, which Republican governors had stocked with conservative members over the past 16 years. Davis is expected to appoint three of the board's five seats by March, and a new general counsel in July. "There have been 16 years of not representing farm workers," Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the UFW, told the *Sacramento Bee*. "We have pinned our hopes on Gray Davis so the farm workers can finally get some justice." **K.K.**

bill to require that the mayor give the council 30 days' notice of any corporate subsidies of more than \$1 million. "If this was an education investment or social welfare expenditure of nearly a billion dollars, there'd be all kinds of public scrutiny of this kind of deal," Bowles says.

Instead, as of mid-January, the mayor's office had yet to make public the details of the agreement, even to the council itself—a policy that has become Giuliani's trademark. "There's enormous secrecy with these deals," Bowles says. "Once the council or the public hears about it, it's already done." ■

The Top 10 Shakedown Artists:

Recipients of the 10 largest corporate subsidies under New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani:

New York Stock Exchange	\$800 million (est.)
NASDAQ/AMEX	\$200 million
Mercantile Exchange	\$183.9 million
Bear Stearns	\$75 million
American International Group	\$55.7 million
CS First Boston	\$50.5 million
McGraw Hill/Standard & Poor's	\$34.5 million
DLJ	\$29.5 million
Merrill Lynch	\$28.5 million
Capital Cities/ABC	\$26 million
The Travelers	\$22.1 million

Source: N.Y. state Sen. Franz Leichter and press reports.

Apocalypse for Sale

The typical Y2K story goes something like this: A humble Midwesterner is building a bunker in his basement and stockpiling it with two generators, 100 gallons of bottled water, 25 pounds of beef jerky, an extra pair of camouflage overalls, gold coins and a shotgun to ward off looters. Why? Well, 30 years ago shortsighted nerds designed computers to only recognize six digit dates (e.g., 12.31.99), which means that at the stroke of midnight on Jan. 1, 2000—a.k.a. “the glitching hour”—the world’s computers will think it’s 1900 and go haywire. Some say it could be The End of the World As We Know It (or, as those in the know prefer, TEOTWAWKI). We’re running out of time. All of the computer codes are encrypted in the names of obscure *Star Trek* characters, and the programmers are too busy trying to beat the new *Legend of Zelda* to save the planet. Don’t panic or hoard. Why aren’t you panicking or hoarding yet?!

In truth, things might get a little messy, but Y2K problems will likely be minor. ATM cards won’t work and the Rose Bowl may be postponed (though, as the January issue of *Vanity Fair* notes, “there is a small, finite risk that this could lead to accidental nuclear war.”) What you should really be worrying about is your neighbors: Y2K-phobia is in full swing.

Nobody’s happier about this than the Christian right, according to a survey of extreme-right periodicals and Web sites in the Fall 1998 issue of The Southern Poverty Law Center’s *Intelligence Report*. While the John Birch Society and the Michigan militia see Y2K as a global conspiracy plot, other extremists view it as “an opening for revolution or a fulfillment of biblical prophecy.”

Groups ranging from Christian Reconstructionists to the Ku Klux Klan have recognized that the terror of technological meltdown is good for recruiting. “These are people who are super-sensitive to anything that suggests the collapse of social institutions,” millennialism expert Michael Balkun says. “Since nuclear

war really is no longer out there as a terribly likely way for civilization to end, they’ve got to find something else. Y2K is convenient.”

Indeed, as Tom Junod writes in the January issue of *Esquire*, Y2K is the perfect “mainstream apocalypse” for a



“mainstream apocalyptic cult” like Christianity. He attended the Christian Broadcasting Network’s Y2K Conference last fall, where Pat Robertson and 200 Cassandras gathered to compare bulk bean prices and prepare for their “finest hour.” “The whole point is evangelism,” Dale Moseley, who runs a disaster relief service in Oregon, told the crowd. “We’ve seen incredible results in disasters. When people have lost everything, when they have gotten to the point where they have nothing left, they’re incredibly open to hearing the gospel.”

Right-wingers aren’t the only ones who see Y2K as an opportunity. The New Age left is also ready for The Rapture. Trading in fire and brimstone for tofu and crystals, contributors to the *Utne Reader*’s Y2K Citizen’s Action Guide do recommend stockpiling at least 20 pounds of corn, but they also remind readers to talk about their feelings and take time for “inner preparedness.” This sect views the pre-millennial panic as a chance to “build family feeling throughout the community” and create “public citizens.” “As we prepare for Y2K,” Eric Utne writes in the pamphlet’s introduction, “something surprising and quite wonderful is going to happen. We’re going to get to know our neighbors.”

On the surface, these goals seem noble, if a bit mushy. But behind the

talk of “common humanity,” the apocalypse is a yuppie luxury. There’s not a lot of room in the bunker for those without a Whole Foods in their neighborhood or an SUV to cart home 50 gallons of soy milk. To prepare for Y2K, you need disposable income. The back of the *Utne* guide is filled with lists of things to buy: catalogs of “appropriate technology,” preparedness videos and books with titles like *The Passive Solar House* and *The Humanure Handbook*.

The millennialist militia members are spending even more than the survivalist soccer moms. Robertson and Jerry Falwell are marketing Y2K videos to them. It costs a mere \$225 to subscribe to *Remnant Review*, Christian Reconstructionist Gary North’s newsletter, which not only suggests buying gold and grain, but recommends “15 stocks which stand to benefit from this crisis.”

That’s just the beginning of Y2K merchandising: Amazon.com sells around 50 books with Y2K in the title.

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Peter de Jager—the man many credit with first sounding the Y2K alarm—reportedly pulls in more than \$1 million a year in speaking fees and book and tape sales. And an American Stock Exchange listing of Y2K remediation companies—nicknamed the “de Jager 2000 index”—increased in value during its first year of operation at more than two times the rate of the Dow.

All of this fearmongering isn’t really about spreading the word of Jesus or Robert Bly after people have lost everything. The point is to manufacture panic while Master Card is still working. If Y2K turns out not to be TEOTWAWKI, the false prophets won’t be ruined—they’ll be rich. ■